THE AJANTA CAVES

EARLY BUDDHIST PAINTINGS FROM INDIA

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Early Buddhist Paintings from India

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EARLY BUDDHIST PAINTINGS FROM INDIA

Benjamin Rowland

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In the year 1817 the manoeuvres of a company of British soldiers resulted in the discovery of the greatest cycle of Indian wall-paintings in the rock-cut cave temples of the Ajanta gorge located near the source of the Waghora River in Hyderabad State in the Deccan. The faded beauty of these great wall decorations in bat-infested caves soon attracted the attention of pioneer archaeologists like James Burgess and Major William Gill, who exhibited the first copies of the Ajanta paintings at the Crystal Palace in 1866. Unfortunately almost all of these replicas of the pictures in their original state perished in a disastrous fire. Later and far less adequate copies were made by Griffiths and Lady Herringham, to be published in 1896 and 1915. Under the patronage of the Nizam a series of sumptuous volumes edited by the former director of archaeology in Hyderabad, Yazdani, was published beginning in 1933, showing the paintings as they appeared after extensive repairs by Italian restorers. The present volume is intended to give a sampling of some of the great masterpieces of this vast collection of classic Indian art. The word "classic" is advisedly used with reference to the Ajanta murals because they occupy the same position in relation to all later developments in the Buddhist art of Asia as do the marbles of the Parthenon for the history of Western art. The styles of Buddhist painting in Tibet and Nepal, Central Asia, China, and ultimately Japan all have their beginnings in the classic mode represented by this series of murals.

Along the sides of the gorge originally sacred to a Naga, or serpent-king, a community of Buddhist monks began the excavation of *chaityas* or sanctuaries and *viharas* or monastic complexes as early as the second century B. C. It is generally believed that Cave X is the

very earliest of all of these Buddhist cathedrals. Its painted decorations probably date from the first century B.C. or the first century A.D. The subjects of the pictures are chosen from the Jatakas, the legendary accounts of the Buddha's former lives, in which by the performance of good deeds or the suffering of martyrdom Sakyamuni acquired that store of virtue and merit that enabled him to achieve Buddhahood in his final incarnation. The paintings are arranged in the form of a long frieze, with the action progressing from episode to episode as in Far Eastern scroll painting. In this early phase of Indian wall decoration the composition is entirely confined to this single band of ornament, whereas in later centuries the paintings overspread the entire surface of the wall. These paintings, in which animals share the stage with human beings in the enactment of these Indian Aesop's fables, have the same sense of teeming life and vitality that we encounter in the densely crowded reliefs of the famous gateways of Sanchi. The details often reveal a kind of intuitive naturalism in the recording of plant and animal form, because they are the productions of a religion that stressed the humanity of the founder and his kinship with all nature. Details of setting are no more than conventional symbols of landscape or stage props necessary for the unfolding of the story, and the forms of men and beasts are conceptual memory images of the essential rather than the particular characteristics of every form. Later Indian painting is only a more sophisticated development of the principles that governed the art in its beginnings.

The technique of Indian wall-painting, which was followed with little change in all later examples of mural decoration in Asia, is completely different from that of the Western fresco. Whereas fresco, in its true sense implies the application of colours to a layer of moist lime plaster, Indian and all Asian murals were painted on a dry wall. At Ajanta the rough surface of the rock wall was covered with a layer of earth or cow-dung, mixed with chopped straw or animal hair as a binding medium, to a thickness of an inch or an inch and a

half. When this surface had been completely smoothed off, it was covered with a thin layer of finely sieved gypsum or lime plaster, and it was upon this surface that the actual painting was done. The composition was first entirely outlined in cinnabar red. There followed an underpainting corresponding to the terra-verde of mediaeval Italian practice. The various local colours were then applied and the painting finished by an overall strengthening of outlines, dark accents and highlights. A final burnishing process gave a lustrous finish to the whole surface.

The great days of artistic activity at Ajanta came under the rule of the Vakataka and Chalukya Dynasties from the fourth to the seventh centuries A.D. The Vakatakas owed their power to an alliance by marriage with the royal house of the Guptas. Their lineage purported to go back to the legendary serpent-king who in ancient days ruled the dark valley of Ajanta. After the invasion of the white Huns in the fifth century the balance of power in India shifted to the south, and in the sixth century the Vakatakas succumbed to the mighty power of the Chalukyas. It is probable that the decorations at Cave I at Ajanta were done during the reign of Pulakesin II, who died in 642 A.D.

The great paintings of the Ajanta caves represent only the culmination, not the renaissance, of a very ancient tradition. Mentions of painted palaces and pavilions in the *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana* indicate that the art probably goes back to pre-Buddhist times. Even the very earliest paintings at Ajanta, from the first century A.D., demonstrate a sophisticated technique in every way comparable to the achievement of sculpture of the early classic period. A number of Indian texts such as the *Kama sutra* and the *Vishnudharmottaram* set forth the rules and canons of painting. The originals of these canonical writings probably antedate the Gupta period. It is there that we find classifications of the types of painting suitable for temples, palaces, and private dwellings and a distinction between "true, lyrical and secular" painting. There is invariably great stress on the neces-

sity for following canonical proportions as exemplified in the surviving masterpieces of the Ajanta caves. In the *Kama sutra* we find an enumeration of the Six Limbs or essentials of painting.

These Limbs or principles of painting may be understood as meaning standards of performance for the painter rather than hard and fast rules. They include an appropriate representation of forms or appearances, appropriate structure and proportion (*pramanam*), the suggestion of action and feeling (*bhava*), as well as the infusion of the quality of grace (*lavanya yojanam*). The fifth canon enjoins similitude (*sadrisyam*), which may be taken to mean an appropriate resemblance to natural objects rather than realistic imitation in a literal sense. The last branch of painting mentions the proper manner of using the brush and colour. It would appear that these Indian canons are on the whole practical injunctions without the deeper philosophical implications contained in the six canons of the fifth-century Chinese painter and critic, Hsieh Ho.

The use of shading to produce effects of relief was apparently part of the Indian practice from very early times. The *Vishnudharmottaram* specifically mentions three types of shading (*vartana*): a very faint shading like the lines of a leaf, modelling and a wash technique, and a dot or stipple technique. The wash and stipple methods can certainly be recognized in the Ajanta paintings, and the leaf shading may possibly refer to the implication of relief through the varied thickness of contour lines. Certain passages in the *Lankavatara sutra* imply that an effect of *trompe-l'œil* was to be achieved through the use of relief modelling: "As a picture shows highness and lowness, whereas really there is nothing of the sort in it ... it is like the painter's canvas on which there is no depression or elevation as imagined by the ignorant."

Painting in these early texts is usually divided into realistic and lyrical modes, and the *Vishnudharmottaram* stresses the impossibility of attaining a proper expression of feeling in painting without a knowledge of the art

of the dance. This comment explains the vibrant grace of pose and gesture of the painted forms of Ajanta that invests them with a swaying, flower-like rhythm and movement.

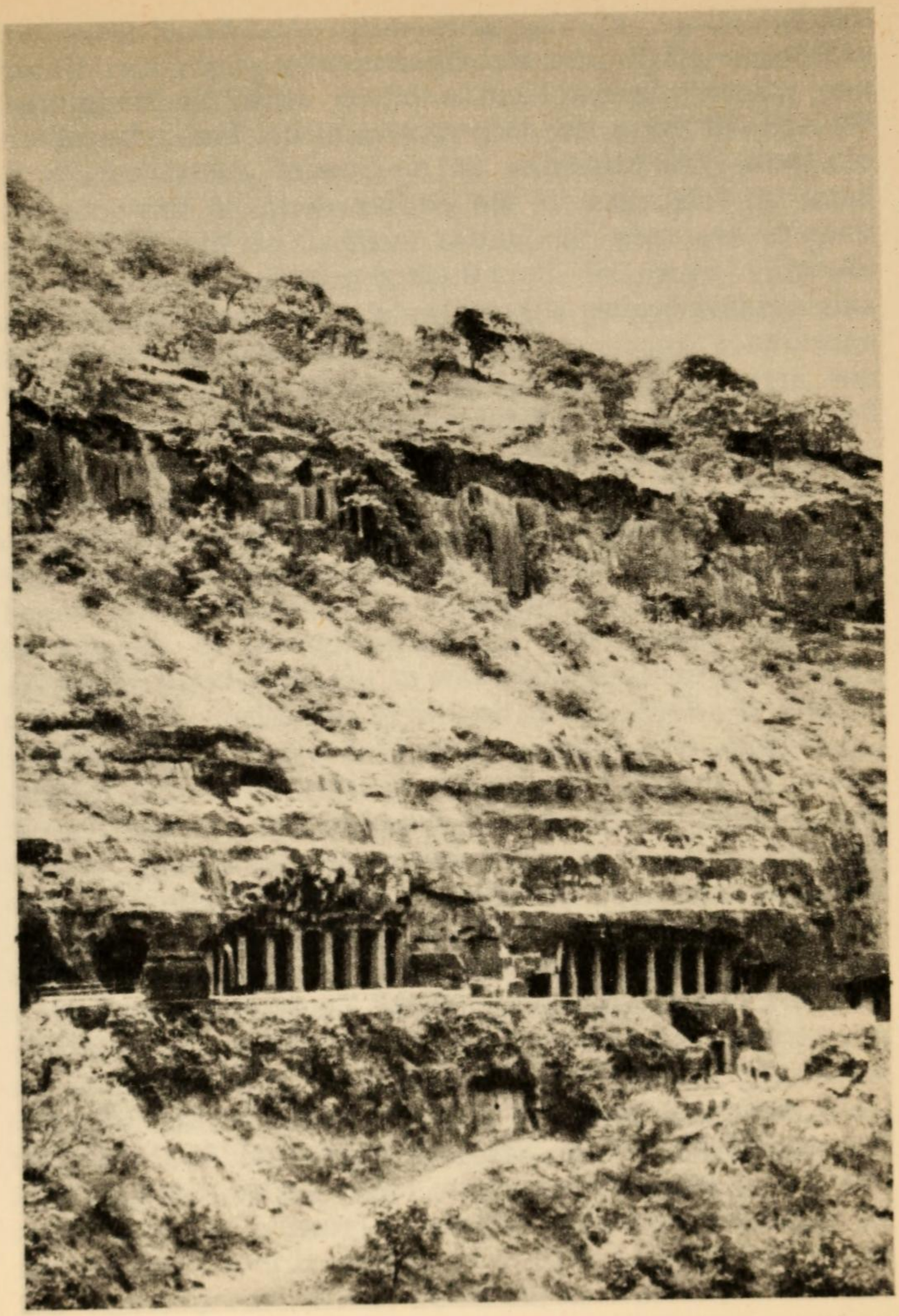
The Ajanta wall-paintings may be considered as the final reflection of the culture of the Gupta age. The conquest of the Emperors Chandragupta and Samudragupta in the fourth century A.D. saw India reunited into a single domain comparable to the ancient Maurya empire. The court of the Gupta monarchs at Pataliputra and Ayudhya is comparable to the society of the Italian Renaissance with its love of refinements and aristocratic pursuits. The reign of Chandragupta II in the fifth century saw a revival of Sanskrit literature and the renaissance of the arts of the drama and the dance. This was the period of the great poets, including Kalidasa, and the monarch's dream of the imperial race was embodied in that encyclopaedia of hero worship, the *Mahabharata*. Buddhism was still flourishing, but was more and more assuming that synthetic character which was to lead to its ultimate re-absorption into Hinduism. Although the Gupta period saw the founding of the great centre at Nalanda, the goal of Chinese pilgrims in search of knowledge of the Mahayana, the worship of the Buddha was gradually being replaced by devotion to Krishna, the benevolent saviour and destroyer of demons.

The Ajanta wall-paintings represent a moment when Buddhism had been completely transformed from the early philosophical and moral concepts of the Hinayana or Small Vehicle to the completely theistic religion of the Mahayana or Great Vehicle. Whereas in early Buddhism Sakyamuni was regarded as the Great Teacher who had overthrown the authority of the Vedas, in the Buddhism of the Great Vehicle he had assumed the stature of an eternal god. In early Buddhism the doctrine, rather than the Buddha, was worshipped and the possibility of salvation from the retribution of karma or rebirth was open only to those who could enter the religious order. The Buddha himself was remembered only in symbolical references to his earthly mission,

because it was believed that he who had gone beyond the fetters of the body could not be endowed by art with the likeness of a body. With the passing of the centuries various influences, such as the anthropomorphic tradition of the West and the demand for the possibility of personal devotion to the person of the founder rather than a code of ethics, led to the creation of the Buddha image and to his deification. In the early Mahayana sutras, such as the *Saddharma Pundarika* of the second century A.D., we encounter the conception of the Buddha as a transcendental and divine personage and the introduction of the cult of the Bodhisattvas.

The Bodhisattvas who figure so prominently in the wall-paintings of Ajanta are mythical beings or archangels who pass from the realm of the immortal Buddha to the world of men. The term Bodhisattva, by definition, means one capable of supreme knowledge or Buddhahood, so that Sakyamuni himself may be described as a Bodhisattva before his Enlightenment. The Bodhisattvas of the Mahayana pantheon are personifications of the virtues and power of the Buddha. The Avolakitesvara of Ajanta is an embodiment of the Buddha's mercy and compassion. The name Avalokitesvara means the "Lord who looks down"; that is, who looks down with pity upon the sufferings of humanity. In Mahayana the Bodhisattvas are beings who have renounced the possibility of Buddhahood in order to devote themselves eternally to alleviating the pains of human existence. These saving divinities invited the prayers of men in much the same way that in mediaeval Christianity prayers were addressed to the remote godhead through the Madonna and saints. Like the worship of the Madonna and saints the cult of the Bodhisattvas appealed to the people as intermediaries with the remote Absolute who had replaced the mortal Buddha. It is for this reason that the Great Bodhisattva at Ajanta is portrayed as a wonderful manifestation of that compassion and tenderness which his mission of allaying the miseries of the world implies.

The principal decoration of Cave I consists of two enormous wall panels at the back of the hall, representing



General view of the Ajanta caves. *© National Geographic Society.*

manifestations of Avalokitesvara, the Bodhisattva or archangel who is the embodiment of compassion. These two painted figures form a trinity with the sculptured Buddha carved in the deep central niche. The composition of these wall-paintings is no longer restricted to a band or frieze, as in the earlier cycle of Cave x, but now overspreads the entire surface of the wall. The towering figure of the Bodhisattva forms a kind of axis around which the multiple forms rejoicing in his appearance appear to revolve. This vast decoration is not arranged according to any system of balance or harmony familiar in Western practice. The arrangement invites the beholder to explore its vast expanse detail by detail. Each figure or group leads the eye to neighbouring portions of the scheme so that the beholder in contemplating it eventually comes to a cumulative apprehension of the whole.

Like its counterparts in the sculpture of the Gupta period, the Great Bodhisattva of the Blue Lotus (Plate 1) reveals the final realization of the Indian ideal of the cult image. Its supernal beauty lies not in the artist's following models of beauty in the world of human beings, but rather on his creation of an ideal, even abstract, idea of supernatural perfection, based on the rules or canons of artistic procedure presented in the *Sastras*. The *Sastras* are the Indian counterparts of the manuals of artistic practice used in Byzantium and even later in the mediaeval West. These books contained a collection of technical recipes as well as canons of proportion and other injunctions for the fashioning of icons. Standing images of the Buddha and major divinities like the Bodhisattvas were to be drawn in a ratio of nine faces or *thalams* for the total height of the image. In a similar way the features or parts of the anatomy of the divine being were to be presented in a metaphorical rather than a naturalistic way; that is, the parts of the body were to be represented in the shape of forms in the animal and vegetable worlds, which had come to be regarded as more beautiful in an absolute sense than the accidental and imperfect features to be found

in human models. This system is really a translation into our language of the magic marks or *laksanas* of the body of Buddha as described in poetic terms in the sutras. Accordingly the eyes of the great being are like lotus petals in shape, his arching brows like the curve of the Indian bow, and his face the perfect ovoid of the egg. The shoulders of the divinity are likened to the massive domed head of the elephant, and his arms to its tapered trunk. A further metaphor describes the torso as like the body of a lion.

Many of the early Indian texts on painting mention the indispensable relationship between painting and the art of the dance. This relationship can be seen particularly well in the figure of the Great Bodhisattva. The body of the towering figure is broken on its axis in an S-curve, in what is described as the *tribhanga* or pose of the three bends. This *déhanchement,* designed to present the body in a pose of supple animation, was almost certainly derived from the Indian dance. It seems likely, too, that the exquisite flower-like gestures of the hands in Indian images of the Gupta period were likewise derived from the language of gesture of the Indian ballet.

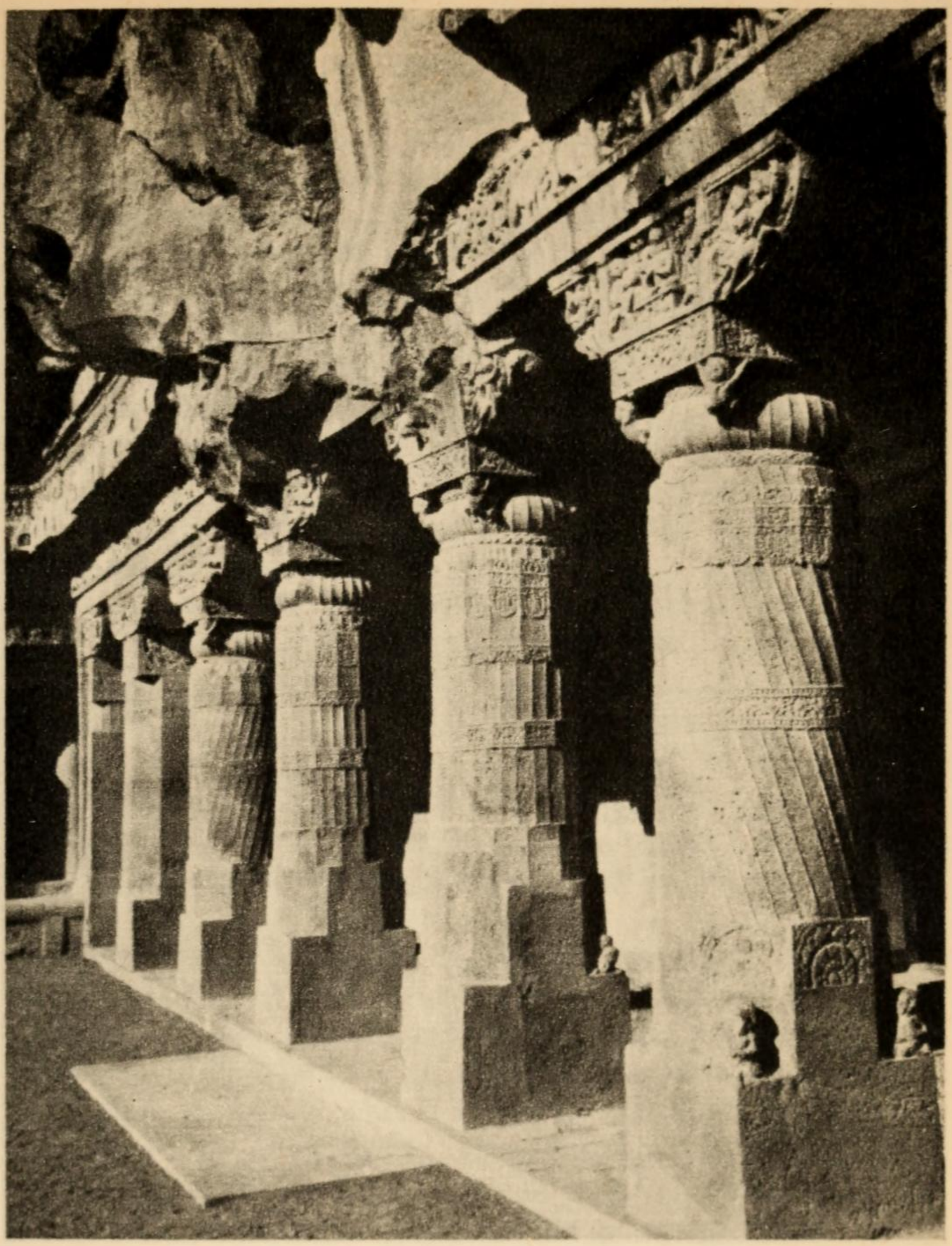
It will be noted that the figure of the Bodhisattva in Cave I appears to be modelled in light and shade, but this chiaroscuro has nothing to do with the accurate recording of any possible natural effects. Like the modelling of fourteenth-century Italian painters such as Giotto, it is intended only to bestow a feeling of solidity and plasticity on the forms. This is a completely arbitrary system of shading that essentially consists of the reinforcing of the contour drawing. Shadows are placed on both sides of the bridge of the nose of the Bodhisattva, and highlights in the shape of streaks of light pigment are applied to the nose and chin to enhance the feeling of relief.

The figure of the Great Bodhisattva is realized as the very embodiment of that compassion and tenderness that his mission of allaying the miseries of the world implies. The flawless, opalescent smoothness of the skin, the eyes half closed in reverie, the physically unreal and yet

beautifully proportioned beauty of the face suggest a beauty beyond reality. This is a loveliness so refined away from humanity that it becomes a symbol of celestial beauty and purity. Through the exquisite linear precision of the drawing and the softness of the shading, a sort of *morbidezza,* the face is veiled in a lyric pensive abstraction. The nacreous tonality of the flesh tints and the smooth unbroken planes of the body convey a feeling of the same abstract perfection of form that is seen in the great sculptured images of the Gupta period. The elimination of all suggestion of texture and the reduction of torso and limbs to uninterrupted pristine surfaces without any indication of muscular or bony structure make the figure a kind of absolute and abstract symbol of the divine. Like some of the great bronzes of the Period of the Hindu Dynasties, the figure of the Bodhisattva appears to be momentarily inanimate between consecutive movements of the dance, and yet at the same time about to stir into vibrant life. This wonderful suggestion of the figure's imminent stirring into life is conveyed at once by the moving rhythm of the *déhanchement* and the tremulous and exquisite gesture of the hands.

The Ajanta cave-paintings illustrate the development of Indian Buddhism from the decoration of the earliest chaityas dedicated to Hinayana themes to the latest in the series entirely devoted to Mahayana ideals. The subject matter of Cave X of the late first century A.D. is drawn entirely from the Jataka tales, the virtuous acts and martyrdoms of the mortal Buddha in previous incarnations. In Cave I, although the Great Bodhisattva images dominate the scene, the Jataka tales are present as symbols of the soul's long spiritual journey through endless births that, in Mahayana, may culminate with absorption into the divinity. The Jataka stories, like the life of the mortal Buddha, are so many illusions created for the benefit and instruction of men.

It is said that the great Buddhist sage, Asanga, lived for a time at Ajanta. He is remembered as the exponent of the Yogachara doctrine, in which all reality is a



Exterior view of typical cave.

dream, and for his conjuring of the Hindu gods into the Buddhist pantheon. In Mahayana the great Bodhisattvas, as emanations or archangels of the cosmic Buddha, are the deliverers who, in compassion for the misery of the world, are dedicated to leading all creation back to the universal and divine Buddha. The Bodhisattvas as angelic beings who invite personal devotion are creations of the same cult of Bhakti which in Gupta times led to a florescence of the worship of Vishnu, the tender preserver. A reflection of Asanga's teaching may perhaps be seen in the composition of the Great Bodhisattva in the presence of his *sakti,* the Buddhist counterpart of the female energies of the Hindu gods.

The strangely fluctuating, moving arrangement of the murals of Cave I, in which all these multiple forms move around the theophany of the Great Bodhisattva, is a pictorial equivalent of the illusion, the dream of reality with the endless flux and change of all existence in Mahayana doctrine. All these shapes seem to converge magnetically on the towering archangel, just as in Michelangelo's Last Judgment the floating, circling forms of risen souls appear, in accordance with Pythagorean doctrine, to be drawn upward to the figure of Christ, the true Sun of the cosmic system. The teeming crowd of figures emerging from the background and swirling about the Bodhisattva seem to suggest the endless birth and dissolution of all sentient beings in the endless substance of maya or the matrix of *alaya vijñana.* Even the portrayal of the events of this world at Ajanta is irradiated by the spiritual light of which these phenomena are reflections. The ephemeral, ghostly presence of the Great Bodhisattva moving with unearthly grace and tremulous with compassion seems to suggest that in Yogachara even the gods are illusion.

Among the large narrative panels in Cave I is a cycle devoted to the *Mahajanaka Jataka,* the story of an earlier avatar of the Buddha's when he was incarnate as a Raja who renounced his throne to follow the life of an ascetic. In the central scene the prince is shown seated with his wife and a throng of female

attendants (Plate 2). He leans toward the queen with an expression of tenderness and solicitude; his hands are posed in a gesture that approximates the *dharmacakra mudra,* the gesture of turning the wheel of the Law (Plate 3). This hand pose is introduced here to indicate that the prince is announcing his pious intention of renunciation to his harem. The various emotions this provokes are revealed in the expressions and postures of the court ladies (Plate 4). It would not be too much to conclude that these expressive poses are the same which would be used in the performance of the Indian dance drama. Although the painting of the court ladies is extremely vigorous and even realistic, the figure of the Raja, who is destined of course to be the future Buddha, is drawn more in accordance with the ideal canon reserved for divine beings, such as the Great Bodhisattva in the same cave.

The collection of paintings at Ajanta could serve very well as a basis for study of the material culture of India in the Gupta and Chalukya periods. In the painting of the *Mahajanaka Jataka,* for example, the painter has depicted a great variety of textiles, striped and figured muslins and gauze dresses that must have been in common use, as well as a great variety of jewelled ornaments. The architecture of the pillared hall that forms the background for the principal scene is probably a reasonably accurate portrayal of an actual palace interior. It will be noted that the bell-shaped capitals of the columns supporting the ceiling recede diagonally into the background. This attempt to suggest an interior space is an example of the same sort of intuitive perspective familiar to us from pre-Renaissance painting in the West.

The paintings of the ceiling of the first *vihara* at Ajanta present a somewhat different style from the great murals of the hall proper. The arrangement consists of a number of rectangular panels filled with decorative motifs framed by smaller squares with representations of fruit and floral forms. Some of these motifs are repeated a number of times so that the effect is of an enormous printed textile or velarium spread over the sanctuary.

These decorative panels present as typical a collection of Indian patterns of ornamental design as one could find. The floral designs and fruit that fill these squares are perfect examples of the Indian ability to reduce natural forms to a moving decorative pattern without in any way losing the sense of growth in the individual forms. These pliant vine patterns, filled with rhythmic adaptations of flower and bird and human forms, are the painted equivalents of those wonderful fantasies in relief sculpture that are to be seen both in the ornamentation of the Ajanta caves and in such a Gupta monument as the Dhamekh stupa at Sarnath (the ancient Benares). The complex of decoration on the ceiling of Cave I includes a wonderful panel of an elephant enclosed in an entanglement of lotus flowers (Plate 12). Although the elephant's shape has been distorted to fit the confines of the frame, the artist of this wonderfully alive and cursive drawing still suggests the massive anatomy and its ponderous strength. A possible reminiscence of classical art in this group appears in the Greek key pattern separating the squares of ornament.

One of the principal decorations in the porch of Cave XVII depicts an episode from the *Visvantara Jataka,* in which the princely hero announces his banishment from his father's kingdom (Plate 23). In a pavilion with orange walls and red pillars the dusky raja supports his fainting queen; her swooning pose is accented by the tilt of her head, and a relaxation of her every limb emphasizes her distress. This detail of the fresco is an illustration of the Indian principle of Bhava, the revelation of feelings and moods in the pose and gesture and expression of forms. The distress of the princess is indicated by her clinging to her husband for support; the prince's concern by his proferring of the cup of wine. The air of anxiety in this tableau is intensified further by the figure of the dwarf looking up at the couch and the maidservant hovering with a carafe behind the seated couple. It will be noted that the glances of all the participants in the drama converge on the figure of the hapless raja. He and his wife are represented

Interior view of typical cave.

again with umbrella-bearing attendants at the left of the composition (Plate 21), which also includes the wonderfully characterized representation of a beggar with bowl and crooked staff (Plate 22). The effect of this composition in its use of dramatically expressive gesture, the device of continuous narration, and the suggestion of stirring movement that propels the figures across the shallow stage are like a translation of the devices of Indian relief sculpture into terms of painting. It may be observed further that the portrayal of the palace setting with its massive cornice upheld by slender columns is probably a reasonable approximation of the domestic architecture of the period. The drawing and colour of the whole complex in Cave XVII is of an extraordinary refinement and beauty and may date from a slightly earlier period than the paintings of Cave I. The attitudes and gestures of the participants in this drama are again completely expressive of the emotional situation presented. Again, as in the courtly scenes of Cave I, the haunting, weary elegance of the forms communicates an atmosphere of aristocratic refinement and infinite grace. It will be noted that in this courtly pageant the figure of the prince or bodishattva is differentiated from his attendants by the ideal canon reserved for his more than mortal beauty.

Another painting, on the rear wall of the vestibule of Cave XVII, portrays the chief of the gods, Indra, and his cortège of celestial musicians flying to meet the Buddha on the occasion of his visit to the Heaven of the Thirty-three Gods (Plate 19). This beautiful detail reminds us of some of the panels of weightless flying *gandarvas* or celestial musicians in Gupta sculpture. The suggestion of endless, effortless flight is implied by the direction of the bent legs of the deities and the ropes of jewels sweeping backward over their breasts. Indra, the chief of the Aryan gods, is distinguished from his attendants by his light colouring and his towering crown. He has the ideal heroic proportions of the Great Bodhisattva of Cave I. Among the many beautiful figures in this composition one should note particularly the beautiful, supple figure of a heavenly nymph who bends in adoration

before the great god. Behind Indra and his retinue are towering cloud forms broken into patterns by striated curving lines of deep blue of varying thickness against a chalky white background. The detail of Indra reproduced here illustrates the extraordinary breadth and sureness of the draughtsmanship. The individual features, eyes and nose and mouth, are defined with free, flowing sweeps of the brush. The varying thickness of the lines provides a kind of arbitrary shading, and the very freedom of the drawing imparts both freshness and boldness to the forms as wall decorations. Again we can be certain that the suggestion of weightless grace and elegance in these figures reflects the postures of the Indian dance.

One of the most beautiful single heads in the entire Ajanta complex is that of a flying *apsaras* in Indra's train (Plate 20). She drifts through the air while beating out a measure on tiny cymbals. Her beautiful jewelled ornaments would seem to place this picture in the class of painting described in the *sastras* as most admired by women. Around her neck is a necklace of diamonds, sapphires, and pearls, its heavy pendants swaying with the nymph's movement. She wears matching strings of jewels in her hair. The pendulum movement of all the dangling ropes of precious stones to the right is echoed in the direction of the stiff white ribands behind her head: the direction of all these ornaments subtly indicates the *apsaras*'s flight towards the left of the composition. The face of this companion of Indra, in the form of an elongated ovoid, almost the leaf shape sometimes recommended in the *sastras*, with its narrow lotiform eyes and tiny mouth, suggests the wistful, ethereal type devised for the Madonna by such fourteenth-century Italian artists as Simone Martini. The Indian head has a haunting evocation of sensuous warmth, and, as so often at Ajanta, the pliant elegance of the hands has an almost Mannerist grace. Both in the lyric beauty of the physical types and rich contrast between the dark flesh and the shining jewels, the paintings of Cave XVII are close in style to the cycle of ruined wall-paintings at Bagh, some 170 miles away.

The numerous paintings of Buddha images in the Gupta and Chalukya caves at Ajanta are the pictorial counterparts of the sculptural icons of the Enlightened One carved at Sarnath in the fifth century. This same style may be seen in the Buddhas that decorate the façades of Cave XIX. Face and form are portrayed according to the same metaphorical method analyzed in the figure of the Great Bodhisattva. The representation of heads and bodies reveals the same reduction of the flesh, the surfaces of face and body, to simplified unencumbered planes that, by this convention, connote a swelling spheroidal roundness and a form purified into a crystalline shape through the elimination of everything accidental or suggestive of the particular. The enlargements of single heads from Caves I and XVII indicate how the painters worked with a sure and fluid brushstroke. This cursive technique inevitably bestows a freshness to the execution, and there is never a suggestion of a mechanical repetition or tracing of types. The varying thickness of the outlines, just as much as the abstract shading employed, aids in creating the illusion of relief.

Just as the sculpture of the Gupta period provided a canon for the entire Asian world, so the paintings of Ajanta, in style, in type and in technique, exerted their influence on Buddhist art for centuries to come. The later Jain and Hindu paintings at Sittanavasal and Badami are perpetuations of the refinement of the great murals of the Ajanta caves. Later Hindu wall-paintings, such as the fragments at Ellora, perpetuate the style of the decorative panels on the roof of Cave I.

The famous paintings of Sigiriya in Ceylon, contemporary with the great period of activity at Ajanta, may be regarded as rather bold provincial reflections of the Ajanta manner, and even the twelfth-century decorations of the northern temple at Polonnaruwa represent a conventionalized derivation from the narrative panels in Caves I and XVII. The spread of Buddhism northward and eastward over Turkestan to China brought with it a diffusion of the great styles of Indian sculpture and painting. The vast painted complex that once decorated the niche of the

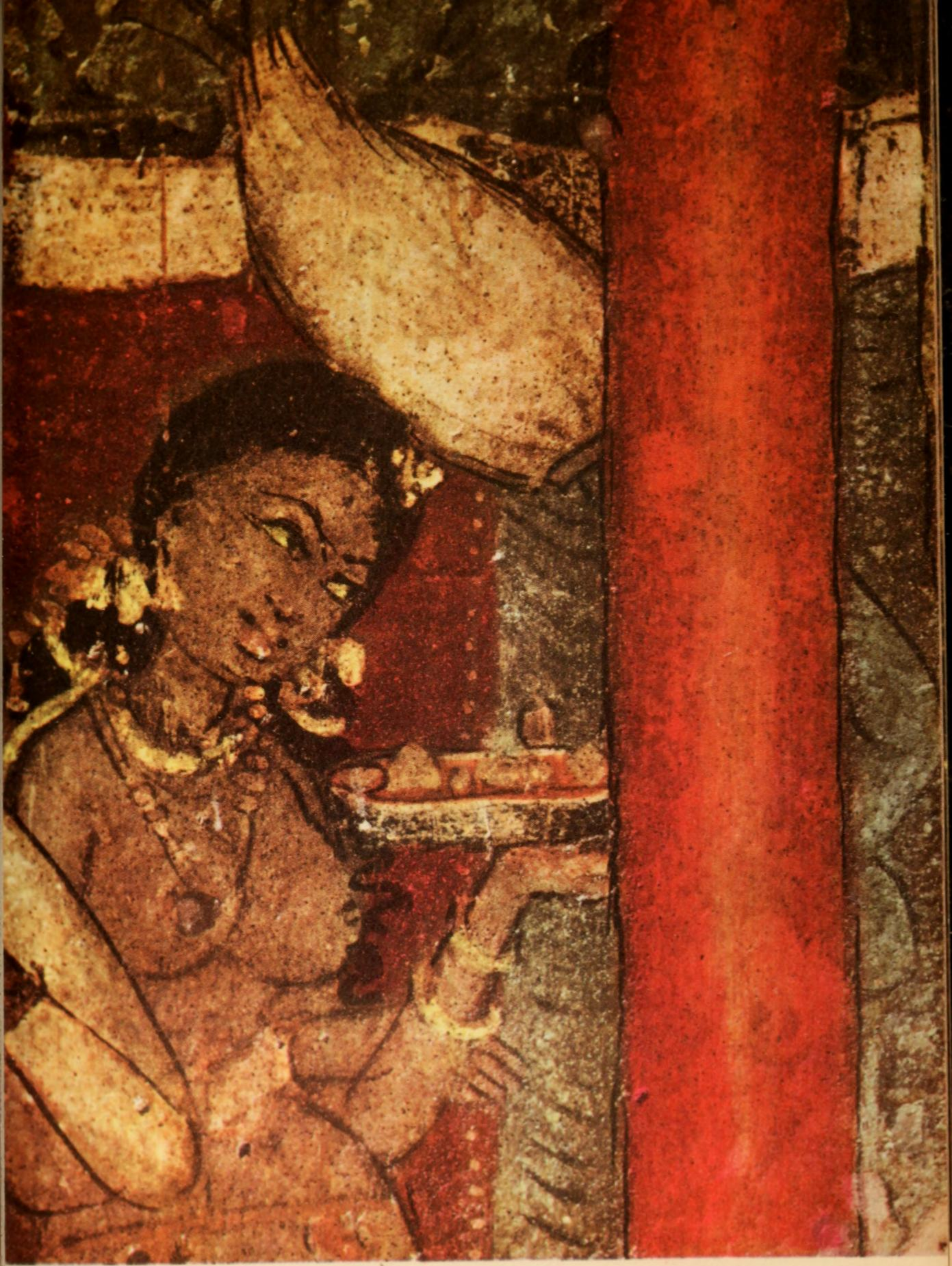
175-foot Buddha at Bamiyan represents the Ajanta style modified by a somewhat more linear and decorative Iranian idiom. The seventh-century sanctuary of Fondukistan was decorated with paintings of Bodhisattvas and Taras, which in their sensuous elegance are directly derived from the Ajanta style. In all of these Afghan examples of the Indian style the drawing has become somewhat hard and wiry, and the soft *sfumato* shading of Ajanta has been conventionalized into a hard reinforcement of the contours in bands of darker pigments.

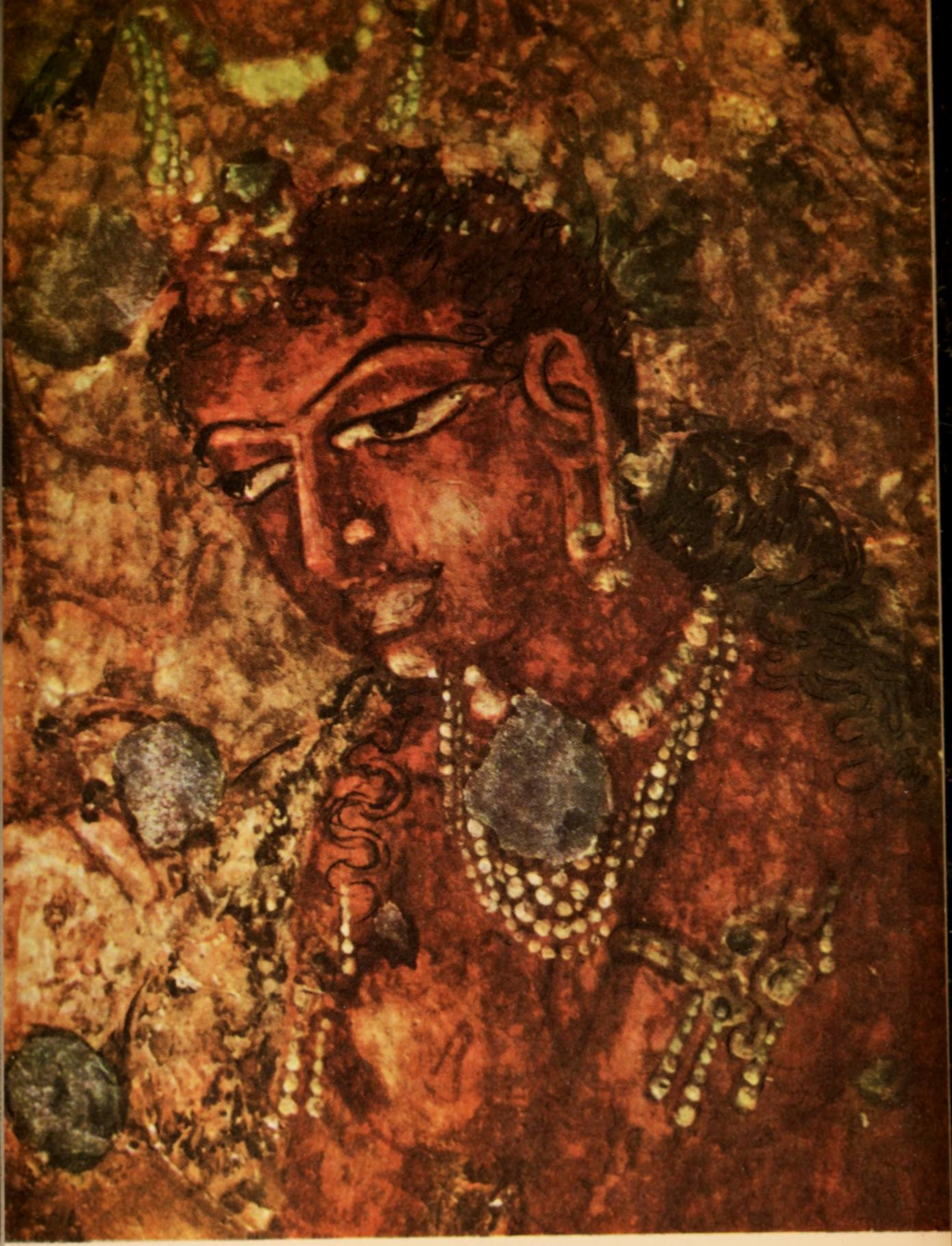
The eastward diffusion of the Ajanta style at sites like Kyzil and Turfan is marked by a gradual reduction of the Indian mode to a hard and wiry linear manner. The properly speaking Central Asian style of these sites is probably to be explained as a fusion of Indian and Iranian elements. A shadow of the classic Indian tradition persists in the sixth and seventh-century caves as the famous site Tun Huang in westernmost China, where in many instances Indian types and iconography are combined with the indigenous Chinese technique of definition in essentially linear terms.

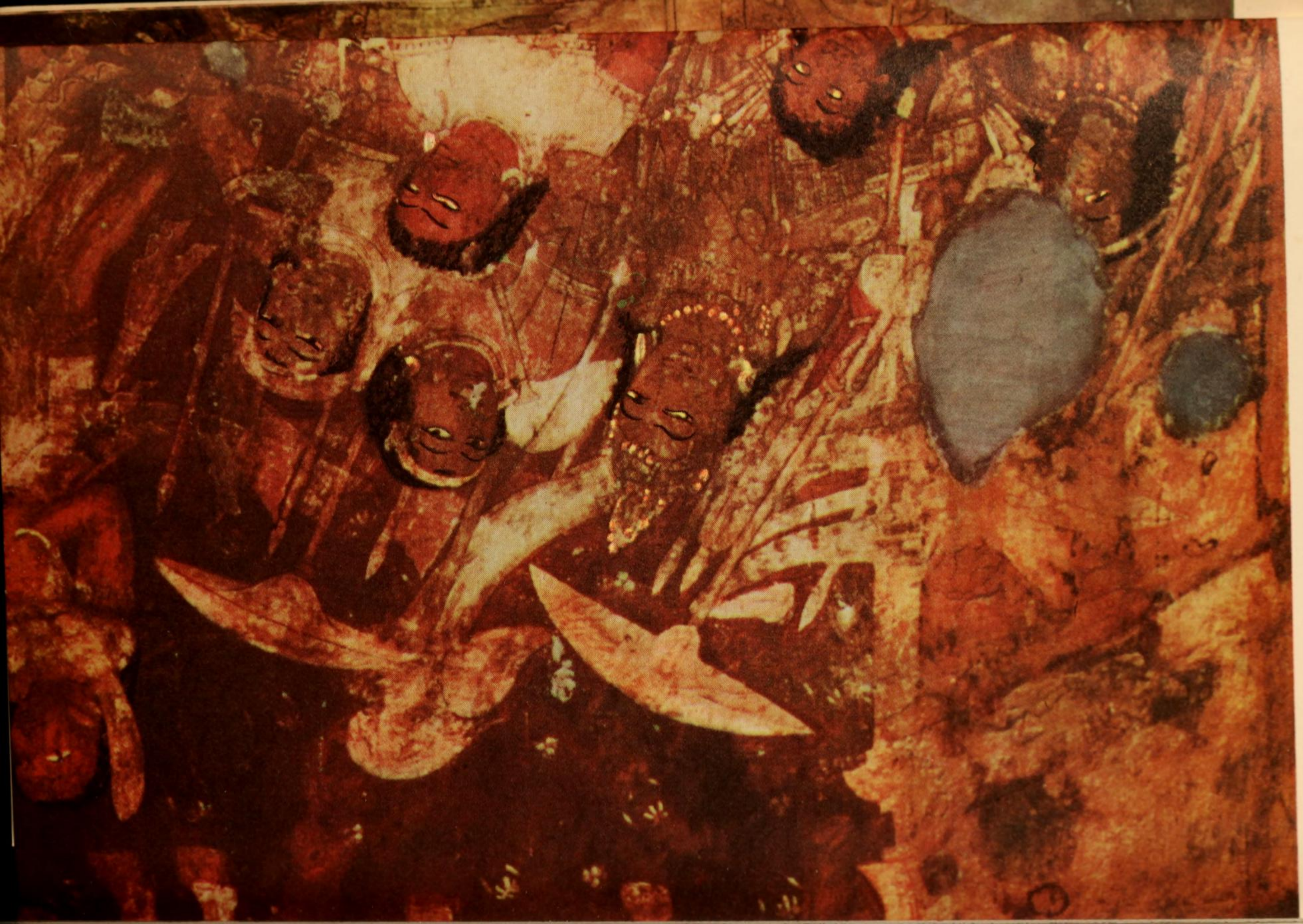
The establishment of close political and religious ties between the T'ang Empire and India in the seventh and eighth centuries led to a much closer imitation of Indian models in the Far East. Except for a few provincial reflections at Tun Huang, no great Buddhist paintings have survived from this period of Chinese art. The annals of Chinese painting, however, are filled with mentions of Chinese artists like Chang Seng-yu and the painters of the Wei-ch'ih family who were reputed to have introduced a style of painting in the Indian manner, which gave an illusion of relief through shading. A few fragments of painting from this period survive in Japan to indicate the spread of the Indian style to the Far East. For example, the paintings on the base of the Tachibana shrine at Horyu-ji in Nara are done in an Indo-Central Asian manner, seemingly transported to Japan untouched by Chinese influence. The figures of new-born souls seated on lotus flowers, both in pose and the use of heavy shading, are so like some of the

figures in the Ajanta wall-paintings that they might almost have been painted by the same hand. Similar parallels between Ajanta and Japanese art of the eighth century were to be found in the famous cycle of wall-paintings in the Horyu-ji Kondo destroyed in 1948. These scattered fragments are all that survive to illustrate what must have been a universal influence of Indian ideals in the Far East in the seventh and eighth centuries. The persistence of these canons in even later periods, however modified by native traditions, serves to indicate how the classic style of the Ajanta wall-paintings moulded the destiny of all later styles of religious art in Asia in much the same way as the classic styles of Greece and Rome affected the entire later development of art in the Western world.

ILLUSTRATIONS







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The cave paintings at Ajanta in North West India are among the great art treasures of the East. Painted between the 2nd and 7th centuries A.D.—the classic period of Buddhist art in India—they stand in the same relation to later Asian art as do the Parthenon marbles to European art.

The paintings illustrate many legends of the Buddha's reincarnations. In these crowded dramas of compassion, yearning and death, the scene illuminates the transience of human existence. In spite of their simplicity, here is a unity so enchanting that as one passes these exotic walls one becomes wholly engrossed in the artists' vivid images of man's progress through life.